

The UK can learn from international experience of widening participation in higher education

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*In many ways England is leading the way when it comes to widening participation in Higher Education. However, **Lindsey Bowes** argues there is a lot to be learned from the approaches of other countries.*



The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) have developed and submitted a national strategy for promoting access and student success to BIS. To inform the development of this strategy, CFE Research and Edge Hill University were commissioned to deliver six international case studies that critically examined the impact and effectiveness of widening participation (WP) policy and practice in each nation and considered the lessons that could be applied to the English context.

'WP' as a concept emerged relatively recently in the UK, particularly when compared with the United States where policies designed to open up higher education (HE) have been in place since the 1960s. The term was first adopted by the UK government following the publication of the [Kennedy](#) and [Dearing](#) reports in 1997. It has subsequently featured prominently in policies to address the under-representation of certain groups in HE and government, along with HE institutions, have committed increasing levels of resource to support the achievement of WP objectives. Existing data suggests that although some groups remain under-represented, overall the number of 'disadvantaged students' – defined primarily as those from low socio-economic groups but also including first generation entrants to HE, those living in areas or attending schools with low levels of participation in HE, those with disabilities, minority ethnic groups, mature students and women – is increasing and the gap in application, retention and success rates between 'WP' and 'non-WP' students is closing. Furthermore, there is a widely held perception within HE sectors that activities to support the achievement of WP objectives are contributing to the progress that has been made.

The term 'widening participation' is not universally used or understood but the importance of, and the challenges associated with, tackling under-representation in HE are internationally recognised, including in the six countries that contributed the case studies – Australia, The Republic of Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, South Africa and the United States of America. Although the structural, socio-cultural and economic issues facing each of these nations are highly diverse, these countries, like England, have all made strong policy and fiscal commitments to WP, which reflect a broader commitment to equality and diversity agendas, social mobility and global economic prosperity.

Despite their differences, there are clear similarities in the way in which the education systems are organised in each nation, including England. Many of the systemic, institutional and situational factors that have been identified as inhibiting or facilitating progression to HE for under-represented groups are also shared. These include: student aspiration, social class, selectivity and stratification in the school sector, differential educational attainment at primary and secondary levels, and institutional diversity in the HE system.

The policy responses to the challenge of widening participation in each nation have a number of characteristics in common. They often involve reforms to secondary education to improve educational achievement, and funding to support outreach work, the development of alternative entry pathways, curriculum development, and financial aid and other forms of non-financial support. Overall, policy frameworks that facilitate dialogue between governments, the bodies tasked with the achievement of WP objectives and HE institutions ensure synergy between legislation, funding guidelines and institutional activity, resulting in more co-ordinated, goal-orientated and effective strategies and approaches.

Outreach and access activities have been shown to be particularly effective when they are delivered within a framework of this nature. The framework ensures activities are underpinned by a strong policy imperative, state funding, and a robust evidence base about what works. However, in the context of diverse HE systems it is also important to ensure that institutions are afforded a degree of freedom to determine who to target, when to target and with which type of activity so that institutional as well as wider priorities and objectives are met.

Up until recently, less emphasis has been placed on the retention and success of under-represented groups and as such these are relatively new areas in terms of national level policy, institutional priority and monitoring and evaluation. Internationally there is a trend towards performance-based funding for institutions that successfully increase retention and completion rates and this is echoed in performance-based rewards for students (e.g. loan to grant conversions in Norway). The emerging international evidence suggests that a variety of other retention activities are proving to be effective but it may be that a coherent programme of pre- and post- entry support has the biggest impact.

There is currently less evidence about the relative influence that different factors have on participation and progression in HE and which approaches or combination of approaches consequently offer the best value for money and have greatest impact. The international debate surrounding the impact of cost sharing models and the role of student financial aid is particularly pertinent to the English context. There is a widely held perception that the introduction of tuition fees and rising tuition costs discourage participation amongst low socio-economic groups. Financial aid programmes, such as the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) in England, have been introduced to mitigate this effect, principally by reducing overall fee levels. However, there is evidence that students are not deterred by higher level fees *if* appropriate mechanisms, such as income contingent loans and deferred repayments, are in place to help them manage the cost of HE. In fact, evidence from Australia suggests that these measures can actually play a major role in facilitating greater access to and success in HE by enabling students to reduce their upfront costs. This indicates that measures to reduce fee levels for 'WP' students may not be necessary where loans are in place and that resources may be better spent on measures to help with the immediate costs of HE such as cash bursaries and scholarships. However, there is also evidence from the United States that deferred debt places a considerable strain upon the public purse if substantial numbers of students fail to achieve the minimum salary threshold and default on their loan. Furthermore, accrued student debt can act as a deterrent to progression into postgraduate level study, where fees are unregulated and there is often no access to financial support.

In summary, the international evidence supports and reinforces much of the understanding developed in England about 'what works' in relation to WP and in many ways England is leading the way in WP policy and practice. The case studies do, however, also extend our learning and, in terms of transferability to the English HE system, raise some interesting issues worthy of further consideration. These include: the role and importance of research and evaluation at a national and institutional level, the interface between state financial support and student financial aid, the importance of effective careers information, advice and guidance, and the barriers and enablers to progression to postgraduate study. Partnerships and collaborative working also have an important role to play. It is clear from the international evidence that the HE sector cannot solve the challenges of widening participation alone; early intervention to raise aspirations and attainment is crucial and this is only possible if all segments of the education systems work together to support learners across the entire student lifecycle.

The six case studies produced by local experts and a synthesis report of the key findings produced by CFE Research and Edge Hill University are available to download from: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wp-effectiveness/>

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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